

Nonmetro Outmigration Exceeds Immigration for the First Time in a Decade

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More people were moving from nonmetro to metro areas than in the opposite direction during 1999-2000, a turnaround from the previous 9 years. During the year ending March 2000, 1.9 million people moved out of nonmetro areas to metro locations, according to the latest data from the Current Population Survey. Outmigration increased by almost 150,000 from the previous year, while the number of immigrants remained essentially unchanged, causing a shift from a net population gain of 73,000 to a net loss of 71,000. A strong shift in migration away from nonmetro areas has been underway since mid-decade, when net immigration had been as high as 350,000 (fig. 1).

In addition to those moving in from metro areas, about 100,000 immigrants have moved directly to nonmetro areas from foreign countries each year since 1995. New immigrants are a relatively small group in any given year, representing just 0.2 percent of the nonmetro population, but nationally they added enough population to offset the domestic migration losses

during 1999-2000. However, immigration is more regionally concentrated, adding population to nonmetro areas in a few States such as Florida, Texas, and Arizona, and in specific counties in other States. In addition, the Current Population Survey does not provide an estimate of annual emigration to countries outside the United States, which if available would indicate a somewhat lower net gain.

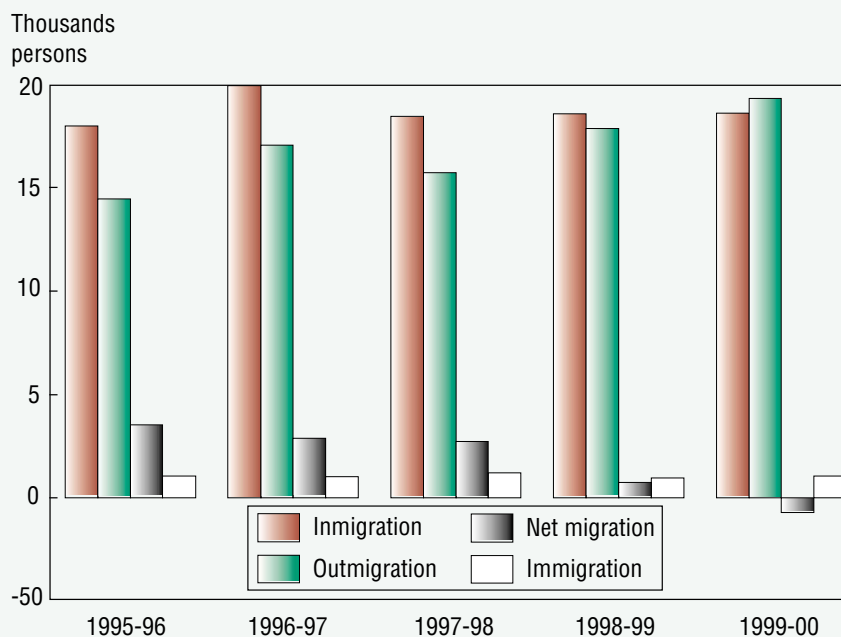
Compared with the net shifts in population, the total flow of migrants into and out of nonmetro areas is quite substantial, averaging over 3 million people per year. In

addition, over 1 million people move between nonmetro counties, typically a local move but often associated with important career or family changes. Over several years, this level of migration substantially changes the geographic location and characteristics of the nonmetro population, largely determining the availability of economic opportunity, public services, and amenities in any locale. With outmigration rising, more nonmetro counties across the country are facing difficulties associated with slow growth or population loss, such as an increasingly older and less-skilled

Figure 1

Nonmetro in-, out-, and net migration, 1995-2000

Without immigration from abroad, nonmetro areas would have lost population due to migration during 1999-2000



Source: Calculated by ERS using the March Current Population Survey, 1996-2000.

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work force, downtown business closures, and higher per capita costs for services such as health care and transportation.

Nonmetro Growth Is Higher in the Midwest

New metro and nonmetro classifications based on 1990 data were fully incorporated into the Current Population Survey in 1996, so 5 years of consistent data showing the flows into and out of nonmetro areas are now available. Comparing the first 2 years (1995-96 and 1996-97, averaged together) with the last 2 years (1998-99 and 1999-2000) shows strong regional shifts in nonmetro migration favoring the Midwest (fig. 2). While the South and West were attracting migrants in record numbers during most of the 1990s, the Midwest saw sluggish growth, but in the last 2 years of the decade, the region's nonmetro population grew by almost

About the Data

These migration statistics are from the Current Population Survey (CPS), conducted monthly by the U.S. Census Bureau for the U.S. Department of Labor. CPS derives estimates based on a national sample of about 60,000 households that are representative of the U.S. civilian, noninstitutional population. The sample is large enough to provide information on the demographic and economic characteristics of the nonmetro population at the national and regional level, but not generally at State or local levels. The March CPS contains a supplemental question asking respondents where they were living a year prior to the survey. Metro and nonmetro migration statistics are derived by comparing past to current residence. This article uses 5 years of March CPS data, 1996-2000, the only years with consistent, up-to-date metro and nonmetro residence classifications available. Prior to 1996, the CPS used a metro-nonmetro definition based on 1980 rather than 1990 census data.

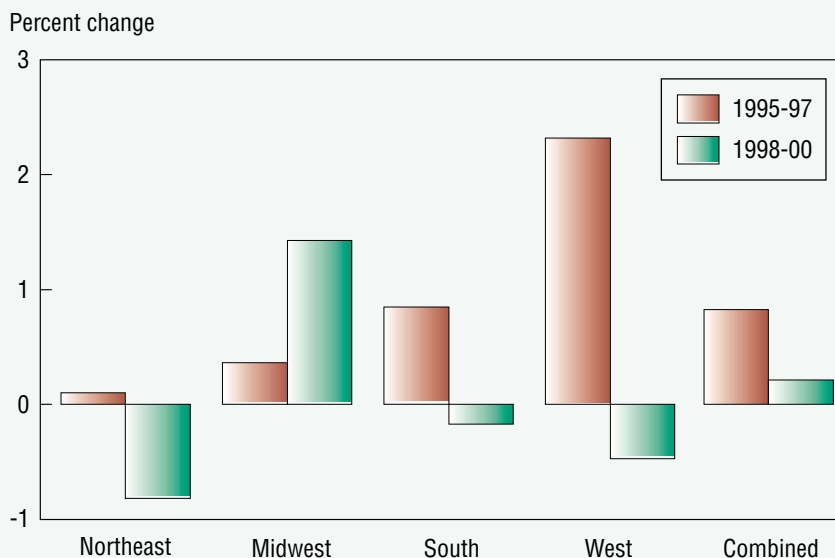
Net migration is the small difference between two much larger migration streams--immigration and outmigration--that are known to fluctuate year to year. In addition, estimates from the CPS can fluctuate even when actual net migration is stable. Therefore, readers should interpret nonmetro migration statistics with caution.

1.5 percent per year. Much of the increase may be attributed to outward expansion of the region's highly urbanized population into

adjacent nonmetro counties. Former rural farming and manufacturing communities are changing over to bedroom communities for urban commuters, to such an extent that many currently nonmetro counties will be reclassified as metro when new areas are defined based on the 2000 census. Other nonmetro growth in the Midwest is associated with migrants seeking new homes in high-amenity areas, such as in the northern Great Lakes region.

The Northeast, also highly urbanized, has not been able to attract migrants or retain current residents within rural sections. Some growth likely still continues in scenic areas and around the edge of large cities, but not enough to offset losses due to declines in the region's rural manufacturing base and related service industries. As metro areas continue to prosper in the Northeast, continued increases in outmigration from nonmetro areas are likely.

Figure 2
Average annual net migration rates in nonmetro areas, by region, 1995-97 and 1998-00
Nonmetro net immigration shifted to net outmigration in all regions except the Midwest



Source: Calculated by ERS using the March 1996, 1997, 1999, and 2000 Current Population Surveys.

The downturn in metro economies in the early 1990s and the preference for high-amenity rural settings spurred growth to record levels in the nonmetro West. As late as 1995-97, the West led other regions in net migration gains by a large margin (fig. 2). Migration has dropped dramatically since then, as metro areas throughout the West experienced a strong economic recovery. However, the emergence of net outmigration from both the nonmetro West and South during 1998-2000 is surprising given the continuing allure of natural amenities throughout the Sun Belt, especially for baby boomers entering their early retirement years. As in the Midwest, the South's metro areas have been growing quite rapidly along their outer edges and expanding into nonmetro territory. Either this trend slowed down during 1998-2000, or outmigration from poorer and more isolated parts of the South increased, or both.

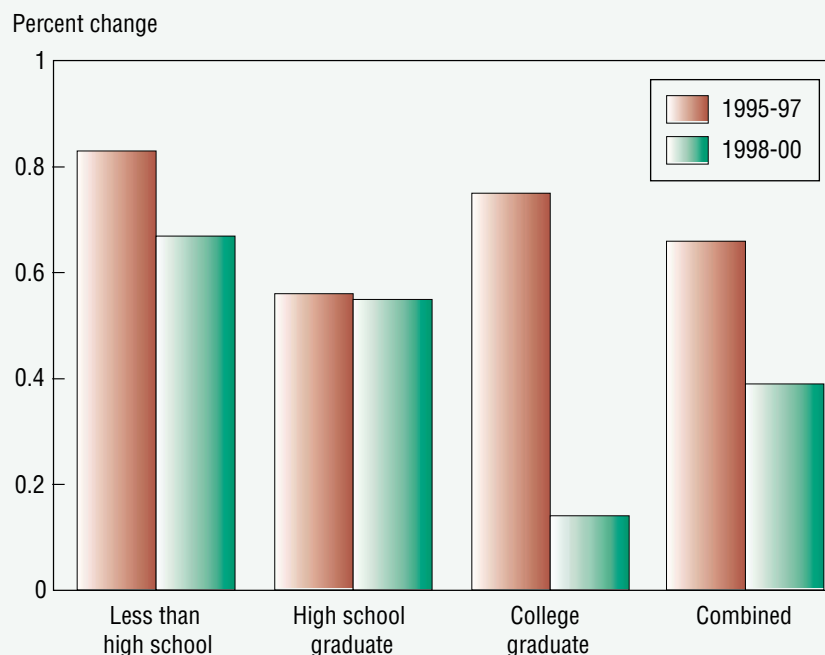
High Nonmetro Migration Among College Graduates Ends

Almost all of the decline in nonmetro net migration between the mid- and late 1990s occurred among college graduates, who moved out in numbers almost equal to those moving in for the first time since the "brain drain" of the 1980s (fig. 3). This is not surprising given the regional shifts outlined above, because the well educated contributed disproportionately to the amenity-based growth in the South and West during the early 1990s. Growth rates are now highest among people without a high school degree, reflecting a narrower range of options available to them in technology-driven urban job markets and, perhaps, the higher availability

Figure 3

Average annual net migration rates in nonmetro areas, ages 25 and older by education, 1995-97 and 1998-00

Nonmetro areas gained fewer college graduates through net migration



Source: Calculated by ERS using the March 1996, 1997, 1999, and 2000 Current Population Surveys.

of low-skill work in nonmetro areas.

Outmigration is concentrated among young adults, who are more educated and who quite often leave rural areas after high school for colleges and jobs in the big city. This traditional pattern holds even for many areas rich in natural amenities with a tourist or recreation-based economy. Such places attract older families and retirees with high levels of discretionary income, but often do not provide enough good jobs to support those with marketable skills just entering the labor market.

Net migration among the college-educated dropped to near zero during 1998-2000, but not below as it did during the 1980s, when net outmigration among this group reached 2 percent a year. Although migration trends are near-

ly impossible to predict, it is unlikely that such high losses will occur in the near future. Technological advances such as the Internet and other rural restructuring trends, especially in manufacturing, have increased rural opportunities for the well educated and diminished the chances that the rural brain drain will resume. Much of the rural rebound of the early 1990s was fueled by migrants seeking a slower-paced lifestyle and other advantages offered by rural settings, often giving up higher-paying jobs in the city to live in high-amenity areas. Despite the drop off in the past 2 years among college graduates, this attraction to rural areas is likely to continue among the very large baby boom cohort, whose migration decisions will help shape the course of rural economies in the coming years. **RA**